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ABSTRACT

Although considerable research exists on the behavioral characteristics of low-accepted children, few studies have examined gender differences in the types of behavior which distinguish between low-accepted children and their better-accepted classmates. This study examined the relative power, for each gender, of different behavioral characteristics in discriminating low-accepted children from their better-accepted peers. It also examined the role of prosocial behavior in distinguishing children in behavioral subgroups of low-accepted children from medium-accepted children and extended the research on subgroups by considering other behaviors that might characterize each low-accepted subgroup. Third- through fifth-graders (N=881) in five elementary schools in a middle-size midwestern community completed a sociometric rating scale in which they rated how much they liked to play with each of their classmates. Subjects also completed a peer nomination measure on which they nominated classmates who fit each of 19 behavioral descriptions. The results indicated that in comparing children of varying levels of acceptance, the same behaviors were important for boys and girls, with a few behaviors seeming to be more salient for boys. The most powerful discriminator between children in the low-accepted group and their classmates, regardless of gender, was the lack of prosocial behavior. When the low-accepted children were subclassified according to aggressive versus withdrawn behavior and compared with matched classmates of average acceptance, both aggressive and withdrawn low-accepted children received lower peer ratings for prosocial behavior. (NB)

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Peer Assessment of the Behavioral Characteristics of Poorly Accepted Boys and Girls

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Abstract

Although considerable research exists on the behavioral characteristics of low-accepted children (see Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990, for a recent review), few studies have examined gender differences in the types of behavior which distinguish between low-accepted children and their better-accepted classmates. This study had two distinctive features. First, it had the sample size to adequately test for gender differences in the behavioral correlates of peer acceptance. Second, a wide range of peer nomination items were included to assess children's behavioral style. Of particular interest was the relative power, for each gender, of different behavioral characteristics in discriminating low-accepted children from their better-accepted classmates. Research has indicated that aggression is a significant correlate of level of acceptance (see Bierman,1986; Coie 1985). However, the relative power of aggression compared to other behavioral characteristics has not been examined.

Another issue of interest concerned behavioral subgroups of low-accepted children. Recently, several researchers (Boivin, Coit, & Dion, 1991; Parkhurst & Asher, 1992; Williams & Asher, 1987) have found that within the low-accepted group of children there are two behavioral subgroups, one characterized by an aggressive behavior pattern, and the other by withdrawn behavior. Parkhurst and Asher (1992) found that for children in both of these subgroups, low peer acceptance was associated not only with a high level of aggressive or withdrawn behavior, but with a lack of prosocial behavior. The present study also examined the role of prosocial behavior in distinguishing children in these subgroups from medium-accepted children. It also extended the research on subgroups by considering other behaviors that might characterize each low-accepted subgroup.

Our results indicated that in comparing children of varying levels of acceptance, the same behaviors are important for boys and girls, but a few behaviors seemed to be more salient for boys. Additionally, the most powerful discriminator between children in the low-accepted group and their classmates,

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regardless of gender, was the lack of prosocial behavior. When the low-accepted children were subclassified according to aggressive versus withdrawn behavior and compared with matched classmates of average acceptance, we found that in addition to being more aggressive or withdrawn than their matched comparison group, children in both subgroups received lower peer ratings for prosocial behaviors. The most powerful discriminator between low-accepted aggressive children and their better-accepted classmates, for each gender, was prosocial behavior. The withdrawn low-accepted children were best distinguished from their better-accepted matched peers on other behaviors which were seen as important by the peer group, namely not being good at sports, for boys, and not having a good sense of humor, for girls. These results help to create a more complete picture of low-accepted children, and deserve consideration in the planning of interventions for children with peer relationship problems.

Aims

» To learn whether the behavioral correlates of peer acceptance are similar for boys and girls.

» To determine the relative strength of aggression versus other behavioral characteristics in distinguishing between children in the low-accepted group versus their better-accepted classmates.

» To learn whether aggressive versus withdrawn low-accepted children differ on a wide range of behavioral characteristics from a matched comparison group of medium-accepted children.

» To determine the relative strength of various behaviors in distinguishing children in each low-accepted subgroup from their matched comparison group.

Method

Participants were 881 third- through fifth-grade children (409 girls, 472 boys) in five elementary schools in a middle-size midwestern community. The children completed a sociometric rating-scale measure in which they rated on a 1-5 scale how much they liked to play with each of their classmates. The children were divided into three acceptance groups based on the average rating-scale score they received. The high- acceptance group was one standard deviation or more above the mean for the class on their rating-scale score. The low-acceptance group was one standard deviation or more below the mean on their rating-scale score. The remaining children were classified as medium-acceptance. The children also completed a peer nomination measure containing nineteen behavioral descriptions (see Table 1). On this measure, the children could nominate an unlimited number of classmates who fit each behavioral description. Children's scores on each item was based on the proportion of classmates who nominated them for that particular behavioral characteristic. These proportion scores were transformed using an arc sin transformation to achieve a more normal distribution.

Results and Discussion

A series of 2 X 3 (gender X level of acceptance) analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to determine whether children's behavioral profile varied as a function of level of acceptance and gender. The significant main effects for gender and level of acceptance are shown in Table 1.

Of special interest is whether interactions exist between gender and level of acceptance. Out of the nineteen behavioral characteristics examined, only four had significant gender by level of acceptance interactions (see Figure 1). The four behaviors were: "easy to push around," "sense of humor," "likes to play alone," and "good at sports." In each case, the behavior was more important in discriminating acceptance levels for boys than for girls. However, follow-up Tukey tests indicated that significant differences existed between acceptance groups for girls as well as for boys. This indicates that, in general, the same behaviors are important in boys' and girls' peer groups, but that certain behaviors serve as a stronger criterion for acceptance for boys.

Stepwise regression analyses were performed, separately within gender, to determine the relative importance of various behaviors in discriminating low-accepted children from their classmates. The criterion variable in these analyses was level of acceptance (low-accepted children versus others). To do a regression analysis, it was necessary to pool items to reduce multicollinearity. Factor analysis with oblique rotation was performed and yielded three factors: aggression, prosocial behavior, and withdrawal. Next, the scores from the 4 items that loaded most strongly on each factor were averaged, and items which did not load on those three factors were used alone. These other items addressed a) academic competence, b) athletic competence, c) sense of humor, and d) whether a child leaves a game when losing. Table 2 shows the results of the regression analyses. For both boys and girls, prosocial behavior was the strongest discriminator between children in the low-accepted group versus the rest of the children. However, as can be seen in Table 2, the relative influence of other behaviors on acceptance varied somewhat by gender.

The next analyses focused on the behavioral characteristics of the aggressive and withdrawn subgroups of low-accepted children in comparison with better-accepted peers. Scores on the aggressive and withdrawn items were used to subdivide the low-accepted children into aggressive low-accepted and withdrawn low-accepted subgroups. The children in the aggressive and withdrawn subgroups were each matched by classroom, race, and gender to a medium-accepted child. This subgrouping and matching procedure identified 40 low-accepted aggressive children (28 male, 12 female), 26 low-accepted withdrawn children (12 male, 14 female), and equal numbers of matched comparison children. A series of 2 X 2 (gender X group) ANOVAS were performed to examine group and gender effects for each behavior. The results are shown in Table 3. Both aggressive and withdrawn low-accepted children were perceived by classmates as low on prosocial behavior, as having less academic ability, and as having less of a good sense of humor.

Next we examined which behaviors were most important in discriminating children in each subgroup from their matched comparison group. Regression analyses were performed separately within gender for each subgroup, using the aggressive, prosocial, and withdrawn factors and the individual items described above. The aggression factor was not used in the regression analysis involving the aggressive subgroup and their matched comparison group, and the withdrawn

factor was not used in the regression analysis involving the withdrawn subgroup and its comparison group, since these factors had been used to define the subgroups. Table 4 shows the results of these analyses. For both boys and girls in the low-accepted aggressive subgroup, prosocial behavior was the only significant discriminator between groups. Additionally, withdrawn low-accepted girls were best discriminated from their matched peers by their lack of sense of humor, and withdrawn low-accepted boys were best discriminated by their lack of sport ability.

Conclusions

Our results indicated the pervasive and powerful effect of prosocial behavior on children's acceptance by peers. Prosocial behavior was the best discriminator for low-accepted boys and girls. Additionally, our findings indicated that although similar behaviors discriminate low-accepted boys and girls from their better-accepted classmates, there were four behavioral characteristics ("easy to push around," "sense of humor," "likes to play alone," and "good at sports") which more strongly differentiated level of acceptance for boys than for girls. When low-accepted children were subdivided into aggressive and withdrawn subgroups, our findings indicated that aggressive low-accepted children were noticeably lacking in prosocial behavior, whereas the withdrawn low-accepted children were lacking in other areas important to the peer group. These results help to create a more complete behavioral profile of low-accepted children, and deserve consideration in the development of intervention strategies.

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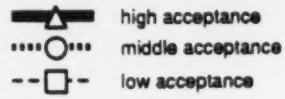
Figure 1
Gender by Level of Acceptance Interactions



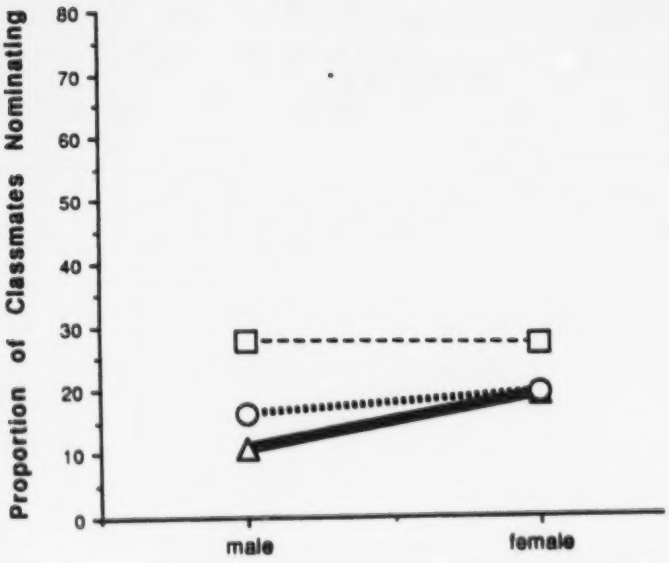


Figure 1a: Easy to Push Around

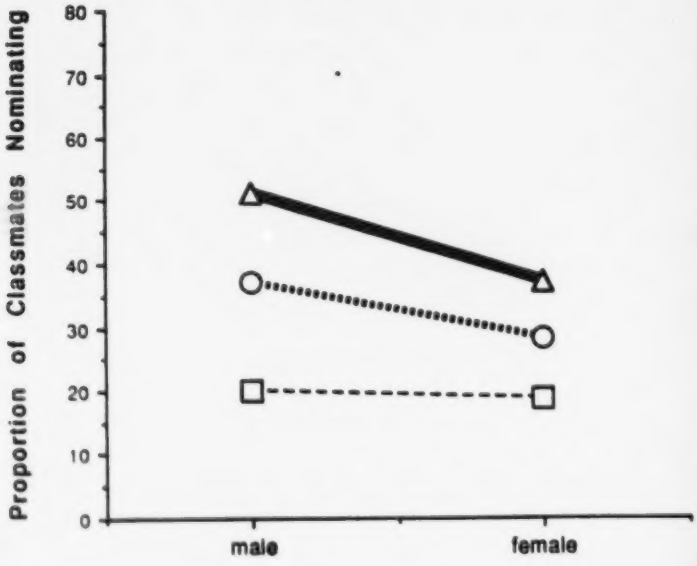


Figure 1b: Good Sense of Humor

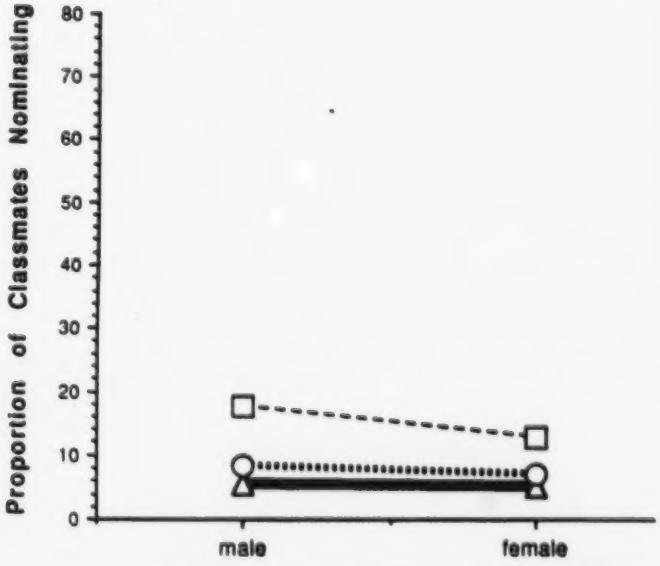


Figure 1c: Likes to Play Alone

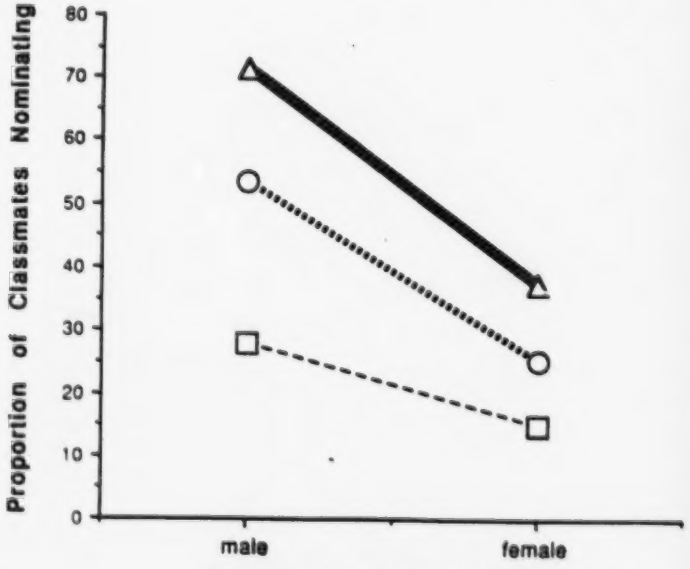


Figure 1d: Good at Sports

Table 1
Behavioral Differences as a Function of Gender and Level of Acceptance

Gender		
Boys > Girls	Girls > Boys	No Significant Differences
starts fights	cooperates	
hits, kicks, pushes	friendly	
mean	honest	
starts arguments	helpful	
interrupts	easy to push around	
bossy	afraid to join in	
leaves a game when losing	shy	
likes to play alone	good student	
good at sports		
good sense of humor		

Level of Acceptance		
Low>Medium>High	High>Medium>Low	No Significant Differences
starts fights	cooperates	shy
hits, kicks, pushes	friendly	
mean	honest	
starts arguments	helpful	
interrupts	good sense of humor	
gets mad easily	good at sports	
bossy	good student	
leaves a game when losing		
likes to play alone		
easy to push around*		
afraid to join in		

*Note: For this item, low>medium and low>high but the scores of the medium-accepted group was not significantly less than the high-accepted group.

Table 2
Stepwise Regression Analysis of Behaviors Predicting Level of Acceptance

Behavioral Predictors	R^2	R^2change	Fchange
Girls			
Prosocial	.29	.29	163.81****
Withdrawn	.33	.04	23.16****
Good at Sports	.34	.01	7.91***
Good sense of humor	.34	.01	3.45*
Boys			
Prosocial	.25	.25	154.09****
Good at sports	.33	.08	55.01****
Aggression	.34	.01	9.23***
Sense of humor	.35	.01	10.97***
Withdrawal	.36	.01	7.38***
Good Student	.37	.01	4.33**

*p<.10. **p<.05. ***p<.01 ****p<.0001

Table 3
Behavioral Differences as a Function of Subgroup Membership

Aggressive Versus Medium-Accepted Matched Peers

Aggressive>Matched	Matched>Aggressive	No Significant Differences
starts fights	cooperates	likes to play alone
hits, kicks, pushes	friendly	afraid to join in
mean	honest	easy to push around
starts arguments	helpful	shy
interrupts	good sense of humor	good at sports
gets mad easily	good student	
bossy		
leaves game when losing		

Withdrawn Versus Medium-Accepted Matched Peers

Withdrawn>Matched	Matched>Withdrawn	No Significant Differences
likes to play alone	cooperates	starts fights
afraid to join in	friendly	hits, kicks, pushes
easy to push around	honest	mean
shy	helpful	starts arguments
leaves game when losing	good sense of humor	interrupts
	good at sports	gets mad easily
	good student	bossy

Table 4
Stepwise Regression Analysis of Behaviors Predicting Subgroups of Low-Accepted Children

Behavioral Predictors	R^2	R^2change	Echange
Aggressive			
1. Girls			
Prosocial	.46	.46	17.90***
2. Boys			
Prosocial	.56	.56	68.96****
Withdrawn			
1. Girls			
Sense of humor	.52	.52	27.09****
Prosocial	.73	.07	3.25*
2. Boys			
Good at sports	.66	.66	45.47**
Prosocial	.73	.07	5.41**

*p<.10. **p<.05. ***p<.01 ****p<.0001